

African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

Volume 11

Issue 3 September 2008

Article 23

9-1-2008

Subfloor Pits and the Archaeology of Slavery in Colonial Virginia

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Recommended Citation

Samford, Patricia M. and Gibb, James G. (2008) "Subfloor Pits and the Archaeology of Slavery in Colonial Virginia," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 3 , Article 23.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol11/iss3/23>

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Book Review

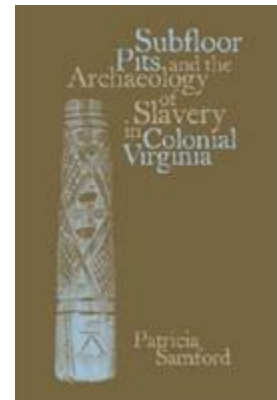
Patricia M. Samford, *Subfloor Pits and the Archaeology of Slavery in Colonial Virginia*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2007, 224 pp., 35 figs., 21 tabs., index, \$29.95 paperback, ISBN 0817354549.

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by James G. Gibb, Ph.D., Annapolis, Maryland.

Patricia Samford offers her readers a typological approach to the problem of intramural pits on African and African-American sites in the Virginia Tidewater region. She uses data on pit size, shape, and location, in combination with West African (especially Igbo) historical and ethnographic data, and American oral histories, first person accounts, and archaeological data to identify three possible pit types: food storage (particularly for sweet potatoes), individual storage of personal possessions, and shrines. Finds from Colonial and Antebellum Utopia, Carter's Grove, and Kingsmill quarters provide the principal database, supplemented by similarly dated pits from known and likely African and African-American houses from eight other sites in the region. She examines artifact size and completeness, as well as excavators' observations documented in field notes, to distinguish between de facto, primary, and secondary refuse, excluding the material from the latter two types of deposit from the typological analyses.

Samford's results, based on simple quantitative analyses are compelling. Patterns in feature placement and geometry clearly distinguish hearth-fronting food storage pits from other types of pits, and limited macrobotanical analysis (Utopia II, III, and IV) and ethnological and historical information suggest that sweet potatoes -- a substitute for West African yams -- likely filled those pits. Samford makes an equally strong case for some of the features representing shrines based on location, morphology, single-episode filling, and non-refuse contents that are paralleled in traditional Igbo and other West African belief systems. The classification of some pits as representing personal "safety deposit boxes" (p. 141) is based to an extent on the lack of patterning in terms of location and morphology. I'm not crazy about the metaphor of the nuanced meanings for the users and their fellow householders probably were more varied than those held by modern renters of standardized box sizes in a modern bank vault. The apparent correlation, however, between the frequency of personal storage pits and households of unrelated individuals is intriguing. Samford seems to suggest that with the formation of single-family households, in the context of slavery, personal ownership within the family was either non-existent or uncontested. If valid, that pattern warrants further study both in its own right and in comparison to the contemporary rise of European consumerism and notions of private property that included the ownership of personal slaves.

Defining only three possible types (recognizing that the excavated spoil might have been used as daub) may unnecessarily narrow the field. Features 715 and 716 in House 3 at Carter's Grove, for example, might represent privies (pp. 146-147), particularly given the



lenses of lime in Feature 716 and the centered placement of postholes at each end of the long axis of each feature (pp. 80-81). The apparent wooden boxes in each of those features may indicate privy holes that were designed for periodic cleaning. Stratigraphic data that might have enhanced the analyses of pit fills were not available for all of the pits from the three principal sites and in no instance do the data appear to have included detailed information on soil textures and topography. Mounding of poorly mixed sediments, for example, suggests different formation processes than slumping thin lenses of well-sorted, fine-grained sediments. In part because many of the features were excavated before the importance of recovering pollen and macrobotanical data was widely acknowledged, those important data were available only for the three Utopia Quarter components. Those data aid in distinguishing food storage from shrine functions, and also have value in the analysis and interpretation of pit fills.

In the well-established tradition of anthropology, with its long association with evolutionary theory, Samford writes much about enslaved Africans coping with or adapting to the conditions of slavery and of a new environment. There is a small breach in this perspective when she notes that "Through hard work, an individual [Igbo in West Africa] can rise from a low status within the community to a position of great honor and esteem" (p. 178). Personal storage pits, as assertions of private possessions in households of unrelated persons, and subterranean shrines propitiating ancestors and appealing to deities are culturally bound but varied individual expressions. The idea that individuals and even entire communities can try to excel in one or more aspects of their lives is something often overlooked in the archaeological literature, and the archaeological correlates of ambition remain largely unrecognized and unsought. Similarly, Samford's discussion of shrines addresses the realm of the individual, the archaeology of which necessarily encompasses both adaptation and ambition. Her suggestion that the pits of the three plantations were created and used by several generations of related persons who learned and modified designs also leads to questions about leadership and individuality in the past as expressed through material remains.

Brief vignettes leading off Chapters 6 through 8 link various data through narrative, each giving voice to the imagined thoughts of individuals known to have occupied the sites in question. Although imagined, each vignette draws on archaeological data and is informed by historical and ethnohistorical research. These stories effectively and usefully link data and remind analyst and reader alike that features and artifacts were used by individuals. They are less effective in getting to the ethos of the people they portray, the thoughts of the protagonists seeming too Western to ring true. Insofar as the vignettes precede the analyses in each case, that is not a weakness; more nuanced narratives based on the results of the analyses might make for interesting epilogues to each of those three chapters.

Samford writes clear expository prose, unencumbered by jargon and metaphysics, although she repeatedly reminds the reader of material already well covered. The current convention of avoiding the first person contributes such wordy constructs as "It is hypothesized . . .," and "The decision was made . . ." (pp. 119-120), and the grammatically suspect "This study hypothesizes . . ." As a whole, *Subfloor Pits* is a quick read with usable data and illustrations. None who read this book will ever look at subfloor pits in the same

way, and Samford's work will inspire her readers to conduct more careful excavations, macrobotanical and pollen sampling, and detailed documentation of these features. I also look forward to the more regular use of interpretive vignettes as an analytic tool.